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ABSTRACT

An executive summary of a study designed to investigate the identification and solution of clinical and nonclinical problems in dental practice is presented. The study used a combination of structured group meetings of individuals involved in dentistry and related areas and written workbooks completed by participants. A steering committee advised the study staff on methods and procedures for the conduct of the research and the analysis of results. Four task groups developed the workbooks designed around a taxonomy of problems in dental practice. The taxonomy contained three major problem classifications: management, administrative/operational, and technical/clinical. Task force members identified and described dental practice problems more frequently in nonclinical areas of practice than in clinical areas. Practice management and administration problems accounted for 75 percent of all problems identified. Solution strategies to practice problems involve the use of multiple resources, and sometimes mix formal and informal resources. Peer consultation was the most frequently used resource, followed by independent study and the assistance of external professional support. Continuing education was the fourth most frequently mentioned resource used in problem-solving. Specific recommendations address research into the resources, skills and competencies used by dentists in solving practice problems. Efforts aimed at developing problem-oriented educational experiences in continuing dental education, particularly in areas of practice administration, were also recommended. (SW)

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PROBLEM DEFINITION AND SOLUTION STRATEGIES IN DENTAL PRACTICE

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PROBLEM DEFINITION AND SOLUTION STRATEGIES IN DENTAL PRACTICE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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PDS-. /September 26, 1980

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Study Purpose

Efforts to maintain the continuing professional competence of dental practitioners have largely focused on the use of continuing dental education. A number of states presently require participation in continuing dental education as a requirement for relicensure; several state and national dental professional organizations require participation in continuing education as a condition of membership.

The relationship between continuing education and continuing competency in dentistry is not clear, however, and has been the subject of controversy in the profession. Critics of present efforts at continuing education have claimed that improvements in the educational process would result in improvements in the competence of practitioners. Some have specifically suggested a reorganization of continuing dental education efforts toward a problem-oriented approach to education, based on adult-learning theory. Problem-oriented dental education would focus on specific, identified practice problems and attempt to provide participants with the competencies required for solving these problems.

Adult learning research provides theoretical support for problem-oriented education. However, implementation of this type of education in dentistry has not been accomplished and the effectiveness of problem-oriented education in contributing to competency maintenance is not known. Some of the barriers to implementation of problem-oriented education in dentistry are:

* a lack of knowledge about specific problems met by dental practitioners in practice;

* a lack of knowledge about the solution strategies practitioners presently employ in solving practice problems; and

* a lack of knowledge of the competencies required for problem solving.

The present study was designed to investigate the natural history of problem identification and problem solving in dental practice. The specific purposes of the study were to:

* identify and analyze clinical and non-clinical problems commonly met by dental practitioners during the lifetime of a dental practice; and

* identify and analyze the strategies and resources commonly used by dentists in resolving these problems.

Information resulting from the study should be of interest to organizations and individuals interested in the development of problem-oriented approaches to continuing dental education and to those concerned with quality assurance and continuing competency in dentistry.

Research Issues

The study was designed to address a broad range of questions about dental practice problems and their solution. These questions included:

* What types of problems occur in dental practice?

* What is the frequency of occurrence of clinical and non-clinical problems?

* Do specific problems arise at different times in the lifetime of a practice, or in different types of practice?

* What resources are used by dental practitioners in the solution of practice problems?

* How are these resources employed strategically in problem resolution?

* What are the outcomes of practice problems, are they resolved?

Study Methods

The study was exploratory and evolutionary in its approach and used a combination of structured group meetings and written workbooks to gather data necessary to the study purpose. The study involved nearly fifty participants organized into:

(1) a 6 member Steering Committee who provided assistance throughout the study;

(2) two Project Consultants who provided technical advice and assistance in continuing dental education and adult education; and

(3) four 9 member Task Groups composed of general dental practitioners and dental practice consultants who provided specific information on dental practice problems and solution strategies.

The Steering Committee. The Steering Committee was composed of four practicing dentists and two dental practice consultants selected on the basis of nominations from the Division of Dentistry and the study staff. The Steering Committee met twice during the formative stages of the study, and once following the Task Group meetings to advise the study staff on methods and procedures for the conduct of the study and the analysis of results. Steering Committee members also pretested study instruments.

The Task Groups. Four Task Groups, each composed of seven dental practitioners and two dental practice consultants were selected from more than 125 nominees. Task Group members selected varied systematically in terms of:

* length of time in practice;
* locus of practice (urban, suburban, or rural);
* sex and ethnicity;
* size of practice (number of auxiliaries);
* extent of participation in continuing dental education; and
* membership in professional organizations.

Four Task Group meetings were held during May and June, 1980. A Premeeting Workbook was mailed to Task Group members approximately two weeks prior to each meeting. Members completed and returned the workbooks which were then transcribed and organized to serve as points of departure for discussion at the meetings. Each meeting was one day in duration and was based on a structured group process format which encouraged participation by all members.

The workbooks were designed around a taxonomy of problems in dental practice developed by the study Steering Committee. The taxonomy contained three major problem classifications:

* management
  - an area defined as the human relations aspect of practice management, including patient relations, staff relations, relations with others external to the practice, and the dentist's own personal management;

* administrative/operational

  -- the area of practice management encompassing office coordination and management not directed toward people, such as paperwork, business management and office efficiency; and

* technical/clinical

  -- the direct administration of patient care, including history and examination, diagnosis, treatment plan and treatment, and patient follow-up.

The Premeeting Workbooks provided response areas for Task Group members to describe practice problems in detail and indicate their point of occurrence in practice, resources used in problem resolution, the strategies used in resolving the problem, and the outcome of efforts to resolve the problem.

Results, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Task force members identified and described dental practice problems more frequently in non-clinical areas of practice than in clinical areas. Practice management and administration problems accounted for 75% of all problems identified. Task Group members suggested that practice management and administration problems were often more difficult to identify and resolve and were more frequently recurring than clinically related problems; they considered their basic training and skills were better suited to the resolution of clinical problems. Many problems, particularly practice management problems, are identified early in practice -- within the first five years.

Solution strategies developed by practitioners to respond to practice problems frequently use multiple

resources, and sometimes mix formal and informal resources. Peer consultation was the most frequently used resource, followed by independent study and the assistance of external professional support (consultants, lawyers, accountants). Continuing education was the fourth most frequently mentioned resource used in problem solving, representing 15% of all mentions of resources used. More frequent mentions of resources were made concerning resolution of non-clinical problems than clinical problems.

The study concluded that dental practitioners are active learners who can recognize and describe discrete problems in their dental practice, identify and select resources necessary for problem solving, and plan the strategic use of those resources to solve practice problems. Dentists perceive their skills and competencies in problem identification and problem solving to be better in clinically related areas than in non-clinical areas. The distribution of problems, their occurrence in practice, and the manner in which they are resolved suggest that practitioners frequently develop their own skills and competencies in independent problem solving, particularly in the non-clinical area. In clinically related areas, practitioners are more aware of resources and how to use them, and use problem solving skills learned in basic dental education.

Further research to confirm, extend, and refine the findings of this pilot study will be necessary. Specific

recommendations addressed research into the resources, skills and competencies used by dentists in solving practice problems. Efforts aimed at developing problem-oriented educational experiences in continuing dental education, particularly in areas of practice administration were also recommended. Development activities should take into account the varied resources used by dentists in solving practice problems and should consider ways of more effectively integrating use of formal and informal problem solving resources.